

Snake Handlers to Skeptics: The Soul of Seeking

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During my ministries in Reading MA and Pittsburgh, I would do my part for the church's annual Goods and Services auction by offering an opportunity to purchase the power to choose my sermon topic some Sunday morning. Yes, a risky business – don't try this at home, folks...you may put out an eye.

Some 15 years ago, the high bidder, a congregant named Nancy and I sat down for lunch to hash out the topic, which led to Nancy's provocative question: "When it comes to the very soul of spiritual seeking, are we rational, often skeptical Unitarian Universalists really all that different from say, emotive snake handling Pentecostals?" Gulp. Ok, I'm game. Let's find out.

The religious mainstream considers both of us "fringe" groups, yet, on the surface, it is hard to detect much commonality between UUs and Pentecostals, except for our common citizenry and language; that is, unless they're speaking in tongues, which is known to happen whenever they are "anointed" by the Holy Spirit.

We UUs act reasonably, we sit politely in church; they sway and faint and shout. Pentecostals sing with gusto and spontaneity, we UUs read ahead in the hymnal to make sure we agree with the lyrics. They clap...we do sometimes too.

They tend to be poor southern white; we tend to be middle class and urban, and also white. They drink strychnine; we drink decaf. They handle snakes; we handle rakes! Need I say more?

Earlier in the service, Melissa gave us an evocative reading from the book, Salvation on Sand Mountain, a passionate memoir by Dennis Covington of his two year sojourn among an Appalachian snake-handling sect of Pentecostals.. Covington had originally gone into the hills to report on a murder trial.

Yet, over time, as he became driven by a love of danger, a need to find his own roots, and a genuine thirst for authentic religious experience, he found himself immersed in this subculture.

In his book, Covington tells the often-moving stories of the people who comprise one of the most despised groups in America: poor southern whites, what he calls "the only ethnic group in America not permitted to have a history." Yet it is precisely that history with which Covington is obsessed. Originating with the waves of poor Scotch-Irish who arrived around the middle of the 18th century, they brought with them "their feuds, their language, and their love of music, strong drink, and sexual adventure."

After World War II, many came down from the hills looking for jobs only to discover violence, poverty, and the barrenness of a secularized culture alien to their own. When faced with a hostile society, they turned to a religion as marginalized as themselves and began to speak in tongues, anoint one another with oil, and, when led by the Holy Ghost, drink strychnine and take up poisonous

snakes.

Snake handlers, about 2000 strong, justify their practices by quoting the end of the Gospel of Mark, where Jesus is recorded as telling his disciples: "And these signs shall follow them that believe; in my name they shall cast out devils; they shall speak with new tongues; they shall take up serpents; and if they drink any deadly thing, it shall not hurt them; they shall lay hands on the sick, and they shall recover."

Scriptural authenticity notwithstanding, about 90 of them have not recovered from deadly snakebites. Originally, those who were bitten were shunned as unbelievers; now it's presumed that even the "anointed" can be bitten on occasion and expire.

[In her essay about Covington, journalist Carol LeMasters asks:] Why would any sane person risk his life in such a bizarre way? For Covington himself, the meetings constitute a kind of homecoming, as he discovers the manifold connections between his family and the Holiness movement from which snake handling sprang. The drive behind snake handling becomes clear only when Covington takes up serpents himself. In one of his most poetic and powerful passages, Covington writes:

The air was silent and still and filled with that strong, even light. And I realized that I, too, was fading into the white. I was losing myself by degrees, like the incredible shrinking man. The snake would be the last to go, and all I could see was the way its scales shimmered one last time in the light, and the way its head moved from side to side, searching for a way out. I knew then why the handlers took up serpents. There is power in the act of disappearing; there is victory in the loss of self. It must be close to our conception of paradise, what it's like before you're born or after you die.

Take moment to ask yourself: "What if every time you went to church you knew it could kill you? (and I don't mean "death by boredom!") That would spice up the old Sunday service a bit, wouldn't it? According to Covington: "For these folks, taking up serpents is a kind of sacrament that helps them face life-and-death issues. But if this sacrament brings life, it also can bring death. ... It becomes the ultimate religious ritual, the ultimate religious experience." We may look askance over our horn-rimmed glasses at them, but they, in turn, wonder why others settle for less riveting, less emotive forms of faith.

When I was a student at Harvard Divinity School, professor Harvey Cox shared with our class this favorite saying among Pentecostals: "The person with an experience is never at the mercy of a person with a doctrine." Oddly, this gives us often-skeptical UUs something in common with Spirit-drenched snake handlers: experience lays at the very heart of how we practice religion.'

More so, it is religious experience, not dogma, that serves as the final authority of our individual beliefs. Amazing, isn't it, given that you couldn't find two more polar extremes in the practice of faith?

Religion scholar Huston Smith offers us a useful metaphor for characterizing the way religious experience is well, "experienced." There are

three ways to learn about and know fire, he tells us. The first, someone can tell you about it and you can listen. Second, you can see the fire yourself and learn about it by direct observation. Or, third, you can be warmed or get burned by the fire, experiencing it firsthand.

[Fred Muir notes] that : “We UUs have become known , whether by scholars or laypeople, whether through research or jokes , for approaching the fire – religion – in the first two passive, cerebral ways. Our reputation is for “thinking our way” into and through religion. We are not known (whether this is accurate or not) for direct religious experience, like our Pentecostals counterparts.

For example, the old joke in which a UU arrives at the pearly gates. There are two signs. One says: “Heaven - this way;” the other says “Discussion about heaven - this way.” Which way do you think the UU is heading? To be fair, there’s also this old chestnut: Q: How many Pentecostals does it take to change a light bulb? A: 10, one to change it and 9 others to bind the spirit of darkness.”

If we look beyond the jokes and the obvious differences, though, a provocative question emerges: What is the fire of religious experience that might warm us, that could burn us? Do we have a sense of ourselves as feeling the spirit coursing in our veins, or spiritual joy infused in the very molecules of our beings? And if not, why not?

For the record – I’m not looking to malign our way of worship or suggest that we should become Pentecostal in worship style. We UUs do have spirit and soul and emotions and religious depth. We do. Yet, I fear we’ve sanitized and tamed our religious experience, and filtered out too much of the expression. As a result, I fret that we’ve become so cerebral and skeptical that we’ve robbed ourselves of the warmth of the fire?

Nor am I advocating, by the way, for a religious experience that’s all joy and ecstasy because that would be fruitless and shallow. Joy coexists with pain. We visit summits and valleys, although much of what we experience occurs along a broad, plateau. Our faith must embrace all of these dimensions of living and offering pathways to moments of emotional connection and soul renewal.

As I’ve preached before, if you are here this morning, you are by my definition “religious.” You’ve chosen to bind with others here while undertaking your individual quest for truth and meaning. And, in my view, there is no greater blessing than our longing for something real and truthful and transforming.

Listen to these words from the 20th c mystic Simone Weil. “The soul knows for certain only that it is hungry,” writes Weil. “The danger is not lest the soul should doubt where there is any bread, but lest by a lie, it should persuade itself that it is not hungry. It can persuade itself of this by lying, for the reality of its hunger is not a belief, but a certainty.”

Acknowledging that spiritual hunger carries some risk, especially for those of us who frame even our most spiritual experiences in intellectual terms. To acknowledge spiritual hunger requires us to go out on the edge, because that’s where the spirit and soul are unleashed.

If you like to maintain control at all times, you'll find this very, very uncomfortable. For out on this edge of spiritual experience, the growing intensity carries a message that we are approaching something authentic about ourselves; something beyond reason or ego.

As my colleague Fred Muir observes: "We share with our Pentecostal brothers and sisters the certain knowledge that religious faith is rooted in experience. But the Pentecostals seem to recapture their hearts every time they are together; they share in the joy that they know is their God, they're not waiting for the perfect, right time –now is that time!

We UUs gather knowing it and feeling it, too, but somewhere between the heart and the sanctuary, it may all get detoured or lost or stymied or reasoned away, and it doesn't get shared with those who want and need to know and experience the same thing."

Our own famed Unitarian Transcendentalist, Ralph Waldo Emerson, tells us that it is, indeed, the "soul" where spiritual sustenance and truth blossom. "Reverence thyself and be true to thyself," he writes, "because every man has within him something really divine." Now, that sounds like a sentiment that both an ardent Humanist and a devout Pentecostal could comfortably profess.

Maybe when you come right down to it, our differences are largely a matter of semantics and packaging, as Nancy suggested at our lunch. They call themselves the "Holiness" movement. A popular chalice lighting refers to "the holiness we seek." Pentecostals place the gifts of the Holy Spirit above all else, and if the Holy Spirit speaks to them, they answer the call. The result is unpredictable outpourings of inexhaustible power, wild acts, and miraculous transformation.

"It is theater at its most intricate," writes Covington, "improvisational, spiritual jazz. The more you experience it, the more attentive you are to the shifts in the surface and the dark shoals underneath." You may recall that I likened our own free faith to jazz in a sermon during my first year amongst you.

Here at UUCM, we may not experience what Covington calls an impassioned combination of Salvation Army and acid rock, yet each and every week we, too, open ourselves to the call of the Spirit when we sing a meditative hymn such as "Spirit of Life."

We sing it quietly, like a prayer; no swaying or hooting. "Spirit of Life," we sing, "come unto me. Sing in my heart all the stirrings of compassion, and so on." When we sing these words, we are inviting the Spirit to touch us (or "anoint us" as the Pentecostals would say) and move us towards deeper, more authentic connections.

This experience is unlikely to include hissing rattlesnakes, speaking in tongues, or drinking strychnine. Praise be! However, like the denizens of Sand Mountain, we, too, can recapture our hearts whenever we are together and reverence the divine spark within us and around us.

In doing so, even the most rational UUs might find themselves swaying amidst the Hallelujah Chorus.

Spirit of Life, come unto us. Take us out to the edge. Recapture our hearts.
We'll *try* not to over-think it. Promise!
Hallelujah and Amen.

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